

# Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult: Implications for the Study of Conversion\*

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*Religious conversion is commonly understood to involve dramatic transformations in personality. "Brainwashing" is a concept widely used in the mass media to account for these changes. This participant observation study of a millennial UFO cult concludes that these apparently dramatic changes result from rapid learning of roles rather than changes in personality, or even values, beliefs or attitudes.*

## Introduction

Joining a religious cult can bring about sudden and dramatic changes in behavior. One common explanation for this is "brainwashing," as if these curious behavioral changes are caused by radical shifts in personality. It is not necessary to postulate fundamental changes in personality or values, beliefs and attitudes to account for the behavioral changes of those who join religious cults. Research on a millennial UFO cult has convinced me that role theory provides a simpler and more satisfactory explanation.

The group gained public attention in late 1975 when Walter Cronkite reported the sudden disappearance of more than twenty Oregonians after they listened to a mysterious couple known as "the Two," who called themselves Bo and Peep, claiming to be the two witnesses prophesied in Revelation 11. This couple (a man and woman in their mid-forties) expected to be martyred "within weeks," rise from the dead, perform miracles, and be "beamed up" to UFOs that would carry them off to an androgenous heaven known as the "Next Evolutionary Kingdom." They referred to their approaching martyrdom as "the Demonstration" because their death and resurrection would demonstrate the truth of their "Message" to the world.

In order to accompany them on their journey into space, Bo and Peep's followers had to give up all their worldly attachments, including friends, family, job, and material possessions. By overcoming all ties to the "human level," a biological transformation of their bodies would be completed when they boarded the UFOs. Bo and Peep called this transformation "Human Individual Metamorphosis," or in the cult's everyday language, "the Process." Once they reached the Next Kingdom, each member's body and soul would be permanently welded together in a single indestructible unit. Only by achieving membership in the "Next Level" could their followers free themselves from the endless cycle of death and reincarnation.

After a brief but highly publicized flurry of public meetings around the country, Bo and Peep recruited almost 200 followers, ranging in age from 14 to 75, with most in their early twenties. They tended to be single, highly mobile, and either unemployed or weakly committed to their work, including a few older men and women who left large families, good jobs, and expensive homes. Most members had at least a year of college, were self-defined spiritual seekers before joining, and most had dabbled in a wide variety of religious and self-help groups before deciding to follow the Two.

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*Data Collection*

In 1975 I joined the UFO cult as a covert participant-observer,<sup>1</sup> and remained for seven weeks to observe and participate in almost every aspect of daily life in the cult, including the recruitment and socialization of new members. After leaving the group, 36 members who had dropped out were interviewed.<sup>2</sup> The interviews explored their activities as members, the reasons why they became disillusioned, and their reflections on the entire cult experience.

Since hidden observation is a questionable research strategy, it is worth noting that this paper probably would not have been written without it. Most of the findings that led me to question the popular view of religious conversion first emerged when "back-stage" posing as a member. Although initial observations were conducted without the knowledge of either the Two or their followers, the nature of the study was explained to everyone interviewed. Informants were not only very cooperative, but many indicated their belief that hidden observation was the only strategy that could effectively penetrate the social barriers that insulated members of the cult from the outside world.

*Acting Like a Believer*

Acting like a believer meant conforming to a set of expectations specified by the Two—in other words, playing a role, which every member was expected to play. Status distinctions in the UFO cult were both informal and uncommon. The Two once appointed "group spokesmen" to coordinate family activities, and informally there was an inner circle that enjoyed privileged access to Bo and Peep. But the same behavior was expected of everyone.

The Two were fond of telling their audiences at public meetings that "there are no rules here," expressing the conviction that no one could complete his overcoming unless he willingly devoted all his energy to the Process. Rules implied coercion. But Bo and Peep provided a fairly specific list of "guidelines" for members who were determined to make it off the planet, and most members followed them closely.

When a seeker joined the UFO cult he was expected to give up all his "attachments" to the human level. Most obvious were friends, relatives and material possessions, but long hair, health food diets and even favorite expressions might also be considered attachments. Bo and Peep used the phrase "walking out the door of your life" to describe the process. Because the Two also expected their followers to lock the door behind them, they discouraged any contact with outsiders after joining. Many parents never heard from their children again. Others received post cards and letters intended to reassure them, but the messages usually had the opposite effect. Most of them were brief, impersonal and full of strange religious jargon. To the parents these letters seemed completely out of character. One mother in Oregon captured the feeling of parents generally when she said, "It's not like him. He's never done anything like this before."

Because members were expected to devote all their energy to the Process, any activity that detracted from this effort was considered an "energy-drain" that should be avoided. Some of the most prominent were sexual behavior, drug use, singing, and "socializing," which included idle talk about the past and burdening others with one's doubts.

The energy that normally would have been spent on mundane human activities was

<sup>1</sup>During the early part of the study I worked closely with David Taylor who was then a graduate student in sociology at the University of Montana.

<sup>2</sup>The sample is large considering how much detective work it took to locate ex-members. Bo and Peep's followers were not only highly mobile to begin with, but they came from almost every state and changed their names when they joined. Even as a participant-observer it was hard to learn much about the members because they were not supposed to talk about their previous identities. To make matters worse, they dropped out at unknown locations all over the country.

supposed to be devoted to "getting in tune" with "the Fathers" at the Next Level who would guide members through the remaining experiences they needed to overcome their humanness. Although Bo and Peep didn't prescribe a uniform method for getting in tune,<sup>3</sup> anyone familiar with the group could easily recognize members who were "tuning in." They would be sitting quietly with eyes closed, for several hours a day, far away from other members of the group.

The member's role can't be understood without taking a look at the partnership. Like a miniature encounter group, the partnership (usually composed of man and woman) was designed to produce a heightened sense of self-awareness by developing "friction," a term referring to the normal antagonisms that were an inevitable part of the relationship. Although sexual contact was forbidden, partners were expected to be together 24 hours a day, never apart for more than 15 or 20 minutes, and then only for necessities like using the toilet or taking a shower.

Playing the role also required learning a special vocabulary that reflected Bo and Peep's unique cosmology. For example, if a member complained that his vehicle was a test for him, he would be referring to car trouble, but if he talked about exchanging his vehicle at the Next Level, he would be looking forward to the indestructible body he would receive after leaving the Earth. If he said, "It came to me . . ." or "I had a hit," he would be about to explain a message he received from one of the Fathers, but if he prefaced his remarks with, "it may be a spirit, but . . ." he would probably be venturing an opinion that others might think was "too human." Ordinary topics like work, money, love and television were eliminated. Instead they discussed spirit bombardment, the metamorphic process, heavenly gardens and graduation time. Language behavior on the "trip" had such a stereotypical quality that one disillusioned member, in a moment of rare objectivity, complained that whenever he asked a question he got a "tape recorded message" in reply.

Members also learned to dramatize their interpretations of events by using metaphorical speech. Consider the process of getting messages from the Next Level. Bo and Peep's followers learned to interpret hunches and random thoughts as messages from the Fathers. However, the word "message" is misleading because it implies unambiguous verbal communication. Once I overheard a member explaining his contact with the Father. "He speaks to me as clearly as I am speaking to you now," he said. However, he later admitted to me that "I don't actually hear his words, but the language is so clear that I might as well." On another occasion a 19-year old woman claimed she could see a "glow" around people on the Process. While I do not dispute the possibility of human auras, I was either glowing like the others despite my disbelief, or her expression is an example of metaphorical speech. Another member once insisted he saw "energy lines" connecting me with members of the Next Level.

The member's role performance stood out most clearly during public meetings to recruit new followers. It was here that the UFO people most often resembled the popular stereotype of glassy-eyed cult members spouting mindless religious jargon. When presenting the Message, the group spokesmen often would stare blankly at the audience while parroting the standard script for dealing with the public:

Question: What is it like in heaven? Answer: That's like one dog asking another what it is like to be human.

Question: How do I know this isn't a con game? Answer: If our message speaks to you, you will feel it in your heart.

Question: How do you survive? Answer: The Father provides.

<sup>3</sup>The process of getting in tune is described in Balch and Taylor, 1978.

The blank expressions so often seen at these meetings reflected the members' determined efforts to protect themselves from spirit bombardment by tuning in to the Next Level.

A casual observer who happened across a campground full of Bo and Peep's followers would have seen pairs of individuals camped in separate sites preparing meals, reading the Bible or sitting quietly by themselves as if they were meditating. Compared with other campers he would have noticed little interaction except during the morning and evening when members would gather around the campfire. Discussion during these campfire meetings was quiet and orderly although punctuated by occasional laughter. A conspicuous absence of games, music, smoking and drinking would be noted. In fact, rangers consistently described the UFO people as model campers—clean, quiet and well-behaved. Overhearing members talking among themselves, an observer would undoubtedly have been struck by the uniformity of their speech, and might conclude that Bo and Peep had reduced their followers to “robots.” So powerful was the leveling force of the member's role that even some informants had this feeling when they first arrived in camp. One of Bo and Peep's first recruits put it this way: “I was looking around thinking, ‘My God, this is like zombie land.’ They were in a totally different place. It was very wierd.”

It is important to realize that new recruits willingly adopted this role as soon as they arrived in camp. For example, my partner spent her first evening going from one campsite to the next quizzing old members about the rules she would have to follow on the Process. She was very concerned about doing everything right. Sometimes dramatic behavioral changes occurred even before indoctrination began. The day I joined, nine other new recruits showed up, but I could not distinguish them from the old members because they had already adopted Bo and Peep's stereotyped religious jargon. Once the jargon was learned it was easy to pick out new recruits because they misused the vocabulary and did not know all the rules yet. However, to outsiders these subtleties were obscured.

### *Appearances Can Be Deceiving*

Full acceptance of Bo and Peep's Message usually came after intense involvement with other members of the cult.<sup>4</sup> Very few recruits accepted all of the Message at first. While they recognized many truths in the Message, they were usually skeptical about parts of it. Surprisingly, given the publicity about UFOs, when our informants were asked to identify the least plausible part of the Message, most said they had trouble believing they would really go to heaven in spaceships.

Although many parts of the belief system sounded far-fetched, most followers were self-defined spiritual seekers who were actively exploring new ideas and seeking out new experiences that would accelerate their spiritual growth. In the cultic milieu that produced the UFO cult anything is possible—reincarnation, auras, ascended masters, psychic communication with planets and even UFOs that take human beings to other levels of existence. In this environment seekers learn to be incredibly tolerant of a wide range of religious and pseudo-scientific beliefs. Because they believe so fully in the infinite possibilities of the universe, they often regard skeptical scientific rationalism as an unhealthy obstacle to growth (Balch and Taylor, 1977).

Many informants reported they cultivated a cautious but openminded outlook at first:

I just went with a totally open mind. If they say, “I'm from another planet,” I say OK, fine. I don't know that yet, but you can go ahead and believe what you want. I'm gonna find out.

Reservations often surfaced when new recruits first arrived in camp. Many were not prepared for what they found there. Consider the case of a conservative well-dressed man of 58 who left his wife and home to join in Colorado:

<sup>4</sup>For more complete discussion of the forces leading to full acceptance see Balch, 1979a and 1979b, and Balch and Taylor, 1978.

I'll have to admit that the feelings that crossed my mind at that time were, "My God, we have wiped out our lives, we have burned all bridges behind us." I mean, here we are at the mercy of a bunch of flakes who have nothing to lose, just goofing around. You know, dumb kids, goofy weedheads.

Like many others he decided to remain in the group for a while despite his second thoughts because, as he put it, he had burned too many bridges when he joined (Gerlach and Hine, 1970:99-158).

By the time they arrived in camp new members had committed themselves to the "trip" in several ways. They had announced their decision to friends and relatives and many of them even had their names printed in newspapers. They gave away virtually everything they owned and drove huge distances in a short time to reach their first campground. All these actions tended to commit them to the UFO cult (Becker, 1960; Festinger, 1956; Gerlach and Hine 1970), even when their commitment was not supported by complete conviction.

Earlier I said that full acceptance came only after intense involvement in the cult's day-to-day activities. While this is true, the term "full acceptance" is misleading because even the old-timers vacillated between what one of them called "murkiness and light." Belief in Bo and Peep's Message was always tenuous.

There were times when I felt growth, and then I would tell myself when I was down that I was probably kidding myself. I felt really bad because I wasn't growing, and then I would recall things that I read saying that was when the greatest growth took place—when you can't tell when things are happening. It was very up and down.

The up and down quality of conviction was one of the most distinctive features of membership careers in the UFO unit. Once my partner confessed that she never felt in tune with the Next Level.

When I try to tune in all I do is think about tuning in. I tune in and think about tuning in, and think about thinking about tuning in, but nothing ever happens. . . . I don't feel like I'm getting through.

However—and here is the important point—she continued to go through the motions of tuning in. During our family meetings she talked about her "hits" and "flashes" as if she had a clear connection with members of the Next Level, keeping her doubts to herself because Bo and Peep's guidelines discouraged open questioning. Other followers were shocked when she dropped out because she always appeared to be "in tune."

One of the original Oregon recruits told me, "The thing is, I had those doubts, but the other side of me would say, 'But you've got to have faith,' and then I would stuff it down." Because of their self-imposed restraints on communication, members often managed to hide their disillusionment, even from their partners. Of course, when members did reveal their doubts it was usually to their partners. In extreme cases their behavior became a hollow performance masking confusion and disbelief. One informant summed up the situation this way:

They were just going through the motions and using the right vocabulary, which concealed the fact that inside they were very mixed up.

During my field work many examples of the gap between belief and behavior became apparent. For instance, the day before one of our largest public meetings the couple who had been chosen to present the Message left camp to spend the day "getting in tune with the Father," but actually went to a Robert Redford movie. After the meeting the same couple was in charge of the "buffer camp" where new recruits were to be introduced. One later confessed that by then she no longer believed in Bo and Peep. Yet she faithfully carried out her responsibilities because she didn't think she had the right to turn others against the Two. Her partner, an ex-piano tuner, was widely regarded as one of the most "tuned in" people on the Process, but he carried an expensive set of piano tools in the trunk of his car so he could go to work again in case the Demonstration didn't happen. My point is that their

overt behavior was misleading. They *looked* tuned in, *appeared* committed, but were simply playing a role that concealed their real feelings, even from other members of the cult.

Continued role performance in the face of disillusionment constituted a side-bet (Becker, 1960) that allowed members to keep their options open while trying to come to terms with their doubts. By continuing to play the role, if only half-heartedly, they did not preclude the possibility of returning to the fold in the event of some unexpected development that might convince them that Bo and Peep were right all along. Many members, who still belong to the group, experienced periods of tremendous demoralization, but each time refused to burn their bridges by deviating too far from the path prescribed by the Two. Indeed, the member who used the expression "murkiness and light" to describe his constant vacillation stayed with the group for over a year after this remark was recorded.

### Conclusion

This research convinced me that much of the current writing about conversion is misleading because writers don't know enough about the routine features of everyday life in cults. The private reality of life in a religious cult usually remains hidden beneath a public facade of religious fanaticism.

Social scientists have known for a long time that behavior is not always consistent with values, attitudes, and beliefs. By now this observation is common sense, but it has often not been applied in the study of religious cults. Underlying much of the current thinking about conversion is the assumption that the puzzling behavior of cult members is caused by sweeping personality changes.<sup>5</sup> The terms commonly used to explain conversion in cults betray this assumption. Brainwashing, thought reform, and coercive persuasion are all terms that focus attention on psychological change as if minds must be altered to change behavior.

I am proposing another point of view based on role theory in sociology. The first step in conversion to cults is learning to *act* like a convert by outwardly conforming to a narrowly prescribed set of role expectations. Genuine conviction develops later beneath a facade of total commitment, and it fluctuates widely during the course of the typical member's career. Many cult members never become true believers, but their questioning may be effectively hidden from everyone but their closest associates.

We all know the stereotype of the cult member: glassy eyes, plastic smile, mindless religious jargon. The picture may be oversimplified, but plenty of members fit that description. The UFO cult is a good example. When members presented their message to potential recruits they would stare blankly at the audience while parroting the standard script for dealing with the public.

Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgic model of social behavior is a useful way of conceptualizing these discrepancies. Goffman distinguishes between front-stage and back-stage behavior. Cult members are "on stage" when they deal with outsiders. In their efforts to impress the public with a united front they suppress the doubts, questions, and inner turmoil that might reveal as many doubting Thomases as there are true believers. In the case of the UFO cult, members would deliberately adopt an expressionless public facade to ward off bombardment by evil spirits. Once back in the safety of their own camps, they would start acting like real people again—joking, laughing, arguing, and worrying about their uncertain future. Even in camp their overt behavior could be deceiving. Members, and here I include myself in that category, were often misled by the continued role performance of those who were disillusioned. Like outsiders, we inferred conviction from their behavior without really knowing how they felt.

The lesson is simple: Don't be deceived by appearances. I believe that social scientists

<sup>5</sup>See Conway and Siegelman (1978) for a recent example.



need to adopt the model of investigative reporting to discover what cult members say and do when they are not "on-stage" in front of the public or, if possible, even their peers. Only when we can penetrate the wall of secrecy that normally separates researchers from their subject matter will we begin to understand the nature of the psychological and behavioral changes that occur when someone joins a religious cult.

These observations have important implications for the study of conversion. When people join a religious cult they first change their behavior by adopting a new role. The changes may be sweeping and dramatic, but they are not necessarily supported by conviction. The boundless faith of the true believer usually develops only after lengthy involvement in the cult's day-to-day activities (Bromley and Shupe, 1979; Lofland and Stark, 1965). Some members go for months without ever resolving their doubts, yet they may still appear fully committed because outwardly they are acting the way they are expected to act.

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